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## Openness, Closure, and Transformation in Proverb Translation

### Introduction

A proverb is characteristically open to multiple interpretations. And indeed, this is one of the striking features of the sayings in Proverbs 10-29. But this proves problematic for translators. How does the translator know which interpretation to convey? Or perhaps she should try to replicate the ambiguity itself?

This article approaches this problem by zooming out to the larger “proverb process”. It considers “openness” – not as a discrete, static property – but as a dynamic, alongside “closure” and “transformation”, inherent in the proverb genre. And translation is viewed, not as a task separated off from this “proverb process”, but as one iteration of it. As such, the proverb translator can participate in, even revel in, the closure and transformation that come from her art.

I will begin (§1) by introducing functionalist approaches to translation, biblical proverbs, and what I call the “proverb process”. Then, in §2, I will focus on the first stage of the “proverb process” – interpretation – and the resultant openness to multiple meanings. In §3, I will describe the second stage – application – in which these open meanings are closed down. In §4, I will show the implications of the discussion for proverb translation. An appendix is finally offered with further examples. As I am a British English speaker, this forms my target language and context.

### §1. Preliminary considerations

#### *A functionalist approach to translation*

In this article, I will advocate a particular approach, focussing on the function of the sayings “as proverbs” for their target community. As has been highlighted by functionalism, and by *Skopostheorie* in particular (e.g. Vermeer 1978; Vermeer & Reiß 2013; Nord 2014), the purpose (*skopos*) of a text should have a decisive effect on its translation. The source text is effectively “dethroned” as the sole guiding concern, for the target context and purpose must

stand alongside it. There is no one “correct” *skopos*, therefore no one “correct” translation. Different translations are suitable for different purposes – and this sort of “function specialisation” is as important for biblical texts as for any others (de Vries 2001, 2003). Here, I will be sensitive to the functions and purposes inherent in the “proverb” genre (see below). It would, however, be possible to translate Proverbs according to other *skopoi* e.g. “as an educational manual”, “as a devotional text”, or “as a guide to the linguistic features of Hebrew”.

Functionalists have further stressed that translation entails not just a cross-*linguistic* mediation, but a cross-*cultural* one too. While formalist and linguistic approaches focus mainly on the text itself, functionalist approaches draw in extra-textual factors. Languages are inextricably embedded within cultures, interacting with a range of non-verbal information, conventions, and expectations. The challenge for the translator is to respect and convey the otherness of the source culture, and at the same time make the source accessible for the target audience (who are embedded within their own culture).

Furthermore, the text for translation cannot be circumscribed or definitively interpreted in and of itself. Rather, it gives simply an “offer of information” (*Informationsangebot*, Vermeer 1982) to the recipient, from which she selects those features that are interesting and important within her own culture and circumstances. The translated text then gives a new “offer of information”, based on, but not identical to, that in the source. It must at once show fidelity to the original text, and to the circumstances and needs of the recipients (known as “intertextual” and “intratextual” coherence within *Skopostheorie*; Vermeer & Reiß 2013, 98-103). The interpretation and translation processes cannot therefore be predetermined, but are open-ended. As we will shortly see, this is particularly important for proverbs.

### *Biblical proverbs and their translation*

It is notoriously difficult to define the proverb (for discussions, see Norrick 2015). It has, as Archer Taylor put it, “a certain incommunicable quality” (Taylor 1931, 3). But many suggest that essential to the genre is proverb function. Valued as units of traditional wisdom, they are passed through a society, ready to cut into situations as incisive comments. They intend to be

transformational – transforming the way the participants see the situation, transforming their behaviour within it.

Their power in these situations is largely due to their distinctive form. They are short, sharp, and memorable, replete with poetic devices, and hence with rhetorical power. They are also distinctively open to interpretation (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1973, Krikmann 1974). They employ striking imagery which may carry many different resonances. They are tersely phrased and pithy, pregnant with more meaning than can fit into their tight frame. As stand-alone units, they lack a literary context which might otherwise clarify them. This openness to interpretation means that they may be relevant to many different situations.

So much is true for proverbs in general, but what about the sayings in Proverbs 10:1-29? Scholars have pointed out several features which apparently distinguish these sayings from “folk proverbs”, making them suspicious of using this label. The verses are characterised by a more refined literary style – for example, employing stylised parallelism near-ubiquitously. Rather than the concrete imagery of folk proverbs, they often employ general expressions about character types (wise, foolish, righteous, wicked).<sup>1</sup> In their written form they are necessarily products of the literati, and they show familiarity with royal affairs (e.g. Prov 14.35; 16.10-15; 22.11; 23.1-3). Particular parallels are found with the Didactic Instruction genre, known in royal settings across the ancient Near East.<sup>2</sup> It is sometimes argued therefore, that the sayings have, not a “folk”, but a “school” or “court” context.<sup>3</sup>

However, it has long been argued that the biblical sayings may have originated amongst the folk,<sup>4</sup> and are embedded in Israelite folklore. Many hallmarks of folk proverbs are present: their distinctive formal and poetic features, their multi-applicability and multi-functionality, their potential to evaluate situations and direct behaviour, their transformational power. The most prevalent social circle is the family, and imagery is often taken from the daily life of

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<sup>1</sup> This proved decisive in McKane’s (1970) analysis that they are not true proverbs.

<sup>2</sup> Proverbs is especially closely affiliated with the Egyptian Instruction of Amenemopet (Prov 22.17-24.22), but might also be compared with e.g. Egyptian Instructions of Ptahhotep, Ani, Ankhsheshonq; Mesopotamian Instruction of Šuruppak; Aramaic Instruction to Ahiqar.

<sup>3</sup> A school context was most influentially advocated by Hermisson (1968), and has recently been argued for by e.g. Carr 2005, 2011, and Perdue 2008. Arguing for a “royal court” origin are e.g. Ansberry 2011, Fox 1996, von Rad 1972.

<sup>4</sup> Seminally, Eißfeldt (1913) argued that the biblical proverbs were originally single-lined folk proverbs. He suggested that their form was transformed by the addition of a second line when they were incorporated into the biblical book. More recently arguing for a folk origin for (at least some of) Proverbs 10-29 are e.g. Dell 2006, Golka 1993, Westermann 1995, Whybray 1990.

ordinary people (e.g. Prov 10.5; 12.10; 14.4; 27.23-27). Striking parallels have been found with folk proverbs of other people groups (Golka 1993, Westermann 1995).

It is sometimes assumed that the literate individuals who collected and penned Proverbs 10-29 would not have drawn on a folk form. But this works from a modern Western starting point, and neglects the high status enjoyed by proverbs within traditional oral societies, from ancient times to the present day. The “wisdom at work” amongst the literati is rooted in that of the folk (Fontaine 1982, 168-170). Claiming the authority of the tradition, and speaking in a collective voice, biblical proverbs are imbedded in, and perpetuate Israel’s cultural values (Nakhola 2016),<sup>5</sup> the otherness of which must be respected and carefully negotiated by translators.

The generic similarity between biblical sayings and folk proverbs is such that it is legitimate and fruitful to translate the former “as proverbs”. Translating like this is sensitive to important aspects of their function (*skopos*), viz. their transformational potential when spoken into situations. This function is enhanced by the proverbs’ formal and stylistic features (which cannot in turn be disentangled from their “meaning”). There is dispute, however, about how to capture most fully “proverb style” – to put it crudely, by distancing the translation from the Hebrew text, or by sticking closely to it?<sup>6</sup>

A first group of translators advocates moving away from the precise linguistic components of the Hebrew text (e.g. Miller 2005, Miller-Naudé and Naudé 2010, Pluger 2015, Unseth 2006a-b). Their aim is to express the source language proverb in terms recognised as “proverbial” by target language users. To this end, some analyse indigenous target language proverbs, to distil their distinctive features (e.g. Unseth 2006a). These features – often poetic devices – are then incorporated in translation. Whether or not they directly replicate something in the Hebrew, their poetry captures the text’s distinctive “proverbness”. Indigenous phraseology is sometimes used, to make the proverbs relevant to the community, and occasionally whole indigenous proverbs (e.g. Miller-Naudé and Naudé 2010, 315-318; Unseth 2006b, 168-169). While not necessarily faithful to the linguistic nuances of the Hebrew, these translators show loyal allegiance to the nature and purpose of the text. Their willingness

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<sup>5</sup> In particular, they have been shown to be rooted in the worldviews of MENA (Middle East-North African) cultures, very different from those in the modern West. Pilch 2015.

<sup>6</sup> This relates to a wider issue of the weight given by the translator to source text and culture vis-à-vis target text and culture. This is a complex negotiation, and cannot be reduced to an either-or. The otherness of each much be respected and retained.

to transform the proverbs is out of concern to retain their function and transformational power. However, because moving from the Hebrew means deciding upon a particular interpretation, these translations often lose the text's distinctive openness. This proves the main concern for the second group.

The second group of translators aims to retain proverb functionality by close adherence to the Hebrew, so as to retain its ambiguities. Théo Schneider, for example, argues against "expansion and transformation in translation techniques" (such as are discussed above), for this leads to a lamentable "loss of sharpness" (Schneider 1992, 118). Deciding on an interpretation, and clarifying the Hebrew in this way means the proverb can no longer cut into multiple situations. Instead, he says, features which give rise to multiple interpretations, such as the concise Hebrew syntax, should be replicated. So too, Roland Murphy suggests that "a more literal rendering does justice to the ambiguity of a saying" (Murphy 1998a, 622). As openness is essential for the proverbs' multi-applicability (which in turn is essential to its function/*skopos*), this is an important point. In my view, if it can be retained without further sacrifices (e.g. sacrificing poetic style), this is a desideratum. But I have found that adhering to the Hebrew may feel stilted in English, and thus the proverbs' poetry is lost (see §4 below).

Both these groups are concerned about the function of the text, but (to over-simplify somewhat), the first group retains poetry over against openness, and the second group openness over against poetry. In practice, this means that the first group diverges more than the second from the linguistic components of the source text. However, a text is more than its linguistic components, and my approach will be closer to the first. But I will pay special attention to the issue of "openness", and suggest that losing it may not, in fact, be a disservice to the proverb's nature. Indeed, not only openness, but the dynamics of "closure" and "transformation" are essential parts of what a proverb is. They can thus be relished in translation.

### *Conceptualisation in the "proverb process"*

A proverb – as a functional, transformational entity – is not static, but at work in a situation. And as a unit of traditional wisdom, it is not restricted to one place or time, but catches its users up in an ongoing "proverb process". I interpret a proverb, I apply it, I transmit

it, I translate it. For a proverb, “translation” does not begin with the Bible Society. It is inherent at every stage: in interpretation, I translate one item in the proverb in terms of another (see §2); in application, I translate the proverb into a particular situation (§3); in transmission, I translate it for a wholly new setting. In this article, I will trace a single proverb (Prov 18.4) through the stages of this process, to show its dynamics. My conclusions will be cross-applicable to other sayings in Proverbs 10-29, and further examples are given in an appendix.

The “proverb process” involves dynamic cycles of (re)conceptualisation (Lewandowski-Tomaszczyk 2010).<sup>7</sup> The conceptualisation which comes with initial interpretation is only provisional. The proverb must be reconceptualised whenever it is applied, transmitted or translated. I suggest that these cycles are an inherent part of what a proverb is and does, and that they are of a kind with each other. They seem to be founded in the same basic cognitive process: blending.

In this article, I will use “blend theory” as a basic heuristic tool, without rigorously employing its details. Blend theory comes from the influential work of Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, and began life within cognitive linguistics (Fauconnier and Turner 1998).<sup>8</sup> It stresses that no text, or event, or datum, has a pre-packaged meaning, but that meaning is generated “online”. Conceptualisation is a dynamic construal operation, with imaginative and creative aspects.

Blend theory suggests that in the initial stages of conceptualisation, we construct small conceptual packets in the mind, which then become “inputs”. To use the language of *Skopostheorie*, we might say that each is an “offer of information” to the mind. Selected information from the inputs is transferred into a mental “blend space”, and meaning is generated as they interact. This meaning goes beyond the sum of the parts, for the interpreter necessarily employs creativity and imagination when blending. She brings in her wider encyclopaedic knowledge, and may combine elements in creative ways, transforming her raw materials. The blend has an emergent structure not simply predictable from its inputs. Fauconnier and Turner describe blending as a basic mental process, prevalent in many types of conceptualisation. I suggest that the manifestations of the “proverb process” –

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<sup>7</sup> Lewandowski-Tomaszczyk uses the language of “cycles of reconceptualisation” to refer to the translation process alone, but I am applying it more broadly.

<sup>8</sup> For recent development in the theory, and how it has been applied to diverse fields, see the bibliography compiled by Turner at <http://markturner.org/blending.html> (accessed April 2019).

interpretation, application, and translation – are each blending operations. What’s more, as we explore how this works, we will see the dynamics of openness, closure and transformation.

The next section of this article will consider the initial stage of the “proverb process” – interpretation. I will show how dynamic blending may lead to the proverb’s characteristic openness. Then (§3), I will consider application, where blending closes down meanings, and generates new ones. The final section turns to translation, another iteration of the “proverb process” where blending is essential. There, we will find the powerful interplay of openness, closure, and transformation.

## §2. Opening a proverb in interpretation

The first stage in the “proverb process” involves interpreting the source texts – a challenge given their ambiguous imagery and concise phraseology. An image does not have one fixed meaning, but comes with many different nuances and connotations. And this is particularly challenging for images embedded in cultures profoundly “other” than our own. Furthermore, the proverb’s terse mode of expression means that literary context does not fully clarify the meaning. Often, as James W. Williams has put it, “there is a juxtaposition of images which are projected stroboscopically” (imagine viewing them under a strobe light), “they are seen quickly side by side, then they are shut off” (Williams 1980, 41), leaving interpreters to ponder what they have just seen. Syntactically, this often means a juxtaposition of nominals without connecting particles or verbs which could explain their relationship. There develops a dynamic interaction of parts, as the interpreter blends them together in her mind. As she does so, fresh avenues of interpretation open out, not predictable from either input alone. Let us take an example:

מִיָּם עֲמֻקִּים דְּבַרִּי פִי־אִישׁ נַחַל נֹבֵעַ מְקוֹר חָכְמָה: (Prov 18.4)

*Deep waters – the words of a man’s mouth – a flowing stream – a fountain of wisdom  
(provisional translation)*



Four images are presented here in quick succession. Taken individually, each image is open to many associations. Taken together, their resonances play off each other, but their interrelationship is not absolutely clear. Are there two metaphors in parallel, one in each colon, depicting “the words of a man’s mouth” and “a fountain of wisdom” respectively? Or is there just one metaphor, imagining “the words of a man’s mouth” through three water images? The former, parallel arrangement is perhaps more expected, given the frequency of parallelism elsewhere in Proverbs. However, the latter should not be rejected, and similar “list” arrangements occur elsewhere (21.4, 6, 30, 25.18, 20; cf. “numerical proverbs” in ch.30).

The first colon takes מים עמוקים “deep waters” and sets them alongside דברי פי־איש “the words of a man’s mouth”. The former may make me think of water’s physical properties and physical effects; the latter, words’ potential meaningfulness and social effects. In blend theory these constitute two “input spaces”,<sup>9</sup> from which information is selected and blended. For example, I might find a cohesive blend in the physical depth of waters and the meaningfulness of words. I can supplement this basic structure with wider encyclopaedic knowledge, but how to do this is not pre-determined. The process opens up different interpretations. On the one hand, “deep words” may offer profound wisdom, like the thoughts of God himself (Ps 92.6[5], cf. Prov 25.3). Long-enduring and all-encompassing, they provide much to ponder and explore. On the other hand, words too deep become unfathomable (Job 11.7-9; Qoh 7.24). In the Hebrew idiom, a people “deep of lip” speak a foreign, incomprehensible tongue (Isa 33.19; Ezek 3.5-6).

Alternatively, I might blend the physical effects of waters with the emotional or social effects of words, bringing in wider knowledge as I do. The sea seems to have caused great fear for the Israelites, and often swells up as a negative trope in biblical literature. Psalmists cry out “I have come into deep waters (במעמקי מים), and the flood sweeps over me!” (69.3[2]; cf. Pss 69.15[14], 130.1). So too words can have a destructive effect, through their false accusations, malicious threats, or twisted advice. Or, the “deep waters” might refer to the fresh, unpolluted streams deep beneath the earth – a metaphor for revitalising, refreshing speech. These might be released at the “fountain of wisdom” (מקור חכמה) later in the verse. Conceptualising this metaphor, then, has involved imaginative processes of blending, which open up different possible interpretations, and transform understanding.

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<sup>9</sup> Corresponding to the “target” and “source” domains of conceptual metaphor theory.

The same might be said for the next image – the נחל נבע, “flowing stream”. It may have positive connotations. A נחל is a wadi, which can revitalise the desert land, providing an abundant habitat where fish and plant-life thrive (e.g. 1 Kgs 18.5; Ezek 47.7,9,12), and where the thirsty may freely drink (1 Kgs 17.4,6; Ps 110.7). Blending this with “words”, I might conceptualise speech which brings refreshment and new life. But, in heavy rains, the wadi can become a raging torrent, such as overwhelms woeful psalmists (Pss 124.4; 18.5[4]≈2 Sam 22.5) and wicked nations (Isa 30.28; Jer 47.2). So too words can wreak destruction. This is particularly the case when they are “poured out” (נבע) without discretion, as by fools and wicked men (Prov 15.2,28; cf. Pss 59.8[7], 94.4). This “flowing stream” image functions as a source domain for a metaphor, but its target domain is unclear: it may be the “words of a man’s mouth” or the “fountain of wisdom”. The former permits a negative interpretation, but the latter does not, for this final image is unambiguously positive.

The מקור חכמה “fountain of wisdom” is itself a blend, combining within itself the inputs of water and words. A מקור is a fountain or spring, the exit point of naturally occurring underground streams, which are the purest of deep waters. It is reliable and life-sustaining when surface moisture dries up. Used figuratively, it suggests strength, fertility, and joy (e.g. Jer 51.36; Hos 13.15; Ps 68.27[26]; Prov 5.18). To access these waters, the interpreter must drink deeply from the wise well of proverbial words.

This first stage in the “proverb process” – interpretation – has involved the imaginative, creative processes of conceptual blending. Because of the rich imagery and concise phraseology of proverbs, different interpretive avenues open out. In particular, the מים and נחל can offer interpretations both positive (e.g. Brown 2004, Waltke 2005) and negative (e.g. Fox 2009, Hatton 2008). The literary context stresses the problematic side of words (Prov 18.2, 6, 7, 8). But this may be overridden by social context when the proverb is applied. And it is this iteration of the “proverb process” – application – to which we now turn.

### §3. Closing a proverb in application

By their nature, proverbs demand, not just interpretation, but application. This second stage in the “proverb process” is every bit as essential as the first. And indeed, the

reconceptualisation it engenders may lead us to reassess our initial interpretation: the stages are iterative. Paremiologists have suggested that interpreting a proverb reveals only its “base meaning” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1973). This is necessarily partial and preliminary, an “offer of information” or “proto-blend” as some put it (Aasland 2009, 6). A proverb is not fully meaningful until it is applied to a situation. In this sense, its characteristic openness is provisional: openness is there *so that* it might be closed down in different ways in different circumstances. An open proverb is optimally functional, able to retain its relevance when “translated” into many situations. This “translation” results in transformation – both in our understanding of the proverb and in the situation to which it speaks.

But proverbs are not infinitely open. It is important to acknowledge here that many proverbs have a prominent socially defined meaning – a “standard proverb interpretation” (Norrick 1985). Proverbs tend to be applied in the same sorts of ways by members of a language community. While the abstracted proverb is ambiguous in theory, “everyone knows” what it means.

Despite this, however, proverbs do retain a certain degree of openness in use. At a micro-level, each proverb use will exhibit contextual modulation. Because no two situations are identical, no two applications can be. Information from the context will interact with the proverb, bringing different features to the fore. And the proverb may be spoken to many different ends. It might endorse, forecast, express doubts, reproach, accuse, justify, mock, comfort, jeer, repent, warn, and advise – to name but a few (Krikmann 1974, 3)!

Sometimes macro-level ambiguities are retained too. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett for example has empirically verified multiple base meanings of the proverb “a friend in need is a friend in deed”. These depend on “(1) syntactic ambiguity (is your friend in need or are you in need); (2) lexical ambiguity (indeed or in deed)” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1973, 114). Different users employ the proverb in different ways accordingly. The proverb “a rolling stone gathers no moss” may also yield two divergent interpretations, depending on the user’s understanding of the imagery (Grzybek 2015, 89). By one interpretation (prevalent in Scotland), “moss” is undesirable, and “rolling” protects against it: stagnation is prevented by keeping on the move. But by another interpretation (prevalent in England), “moss” is a sign of peace and stability, and “rolling” would destroy it: prosperity will not accumulate for the restless. We might also note the two different uses of “Is Saul also amongst the prophets?” in 1 Sam 10.11-12 and 19.24 (Lieber 1984).

The way people actually use proverbs, then, can be creative and imaginative, closing down the openness in unexpected and transformative ways. Recently, paremiologists have begun to understand application as a dynamic process of conceptual blending (Aasland 2009, Andersson 2013, Buljan and Gradeček-Erdeljić 2013, Johansen 2007). In this sense, it is a cycle of reconceptualisation of a kind with the initial conceptualisation of proverb interpretation (§2).

In applying Prov 18.4, I mentally generate two inputs: my interpretation of the proverb and my understanding of the context. For example:

*I am in my mother's house, in considerable distress about my upcoming marriage to an unknown kinsman. She soothes and comforts me. She reminds me of the advantages of the match, and my duty to my kin. She tells me of her own experiences, and what she has learnt. Consoled, I murmur "מים עמוקים דברי פי־איש" "נחל נבע מקור חכמה".*

In application, I select only those features of the proverb's offer of information which are relevant to the context. I thus close down its openness. My mother's words have been profound (עמוקים) and refreshing, like a wadi in the desert (נחל נבע). I bring new implications to the proverb – the fountain of wisdom (מקור חכמה) now springs from personal experience, and flows over day-to-day familial affairs, bringing comfort as well as refreshment. None of this is deducible from the proverb alone. And I have subverted the proverb's gendered assumptions by applying it to a woman. These implications transform my understanding, of both the proverb, and the situation itself.

Or take a second example:

*I am at the city gate, where I have been falsely accused before the elders. The verdict has been reached, and I stand condemned. In outrage and indignation, I cry out "מים עמוקים דברי פי־איש נחל נבע". I implore the elders for a מקור חכמה.*

Once more, I have translated the proverb to the situation, blending it with my personal circumstances. And once more, I have closed its openness, this time evoking quite different meanings. I highlight the destructive power of words, like a raging ocean (מים עמוקים) or a wadi's torrential overflow (נחל נבע). I suggest that words, like the depths, are concealing, dark and deceptive. I proclaim injustice (though this is not in the Hebrew text alone). The negativity of the first two images makes the positivity of the third (מקור חכמה) starkly powerful. This

reconceptualisation has changed how I understand the situation and the proverb. Furthermore, by speaking it, I hope to transform my circumstances, stirring the elders to reconsider their verdict.

This iteration of the proverb process, then, is (like the first) dynamic and transformative, using the basic cognitive skill of conceptual blending. In §2, blending resulted in many meanings opening out. Here, blending closes down upon certain meanings, transforms them, and even generates new ones. In §2, I suggested that proverbs are inherently open, ambiguous texts. And here, I suggest that this is in order to be relevant to different situations. In these situations, they acquire fresh meanings, and can have powerful functions. Inherent in this genre is a wish to be fresh and changeable, relevant and potent, ultimately transformational.

#### §4. Opening, closing and transforming proverbs in translation

We turn to one more manifestation of the “proverb process”: translation. Proverbs are distinctive for their characteristic transmission across space, time, and languages. As they are transmitted, they are not averse to changing their form and meaning. Items of oral lore cannot avoid the “Chinese whisper” effect. Pierre Cr  peau, for example, discusses a Rwandan proverb for which he finds seventy variant forms (Cr  peau 1981). Such transformations seem to have occurred in Biblical proverbs too. We often find variant proverbs – verses which occur twice in near-identical forms (e.g. Prov 10.1  15.20; 12.11  28.19; 13.14  14.27). These may have been independently moulded through oral transmission.<sup>10</sup>

As they are transmitted, proverbs are often translated into new cultures and new languages. We find, for example, ancient Egyptian proverbs Hebraised and incorporated into the biblical collection.<sup>11</sup> In this process, form and meaning may change. Consider the biblical proverb                                           – “he who restrains his rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent<sup>12</sup> to discipline him” (Prov 13.24, my translation). This found its way

<sup>10</sup> There are various explanations for this phenomenon. See Snell 1993, Heim 2013.

<sup>11</sup> This is particularly the case in Proverbs 22:17-24:22, which is widely accepted as being dependent on the Egyptian *Instruction of Amenemopet* (see Emerton 2001). However, this is almost certainly a literary phenomenon rather than a result of oral transmission.

<sup>12</sup> Or “rises early” – a textual openness necessarily closed by translation.

into English as “Who-so spareth ye sprynge, spilleth his children” (in the 1377 work of William Langland), then passed through various manifestations, into our modern version “spare the rod and spoil the child” (Speake 2015, 294). The second half of the biblical proverb is gone, and the biblical “hate” is now “spoil”. What’s more, the meaning of “spoil(/spilleth)” in childrearing has changed since its 1377 manifestation – the modern “spoilt brat” was far from Langland’s mind. Form and meaning have been transformed by translation and transmission. And this has given the proverb additional potency. The modern version retains the rhythmic internal parallelism of the Hebrew (lost in 1377), and incorporates a pleasing euphony of sp-alliteration.

The new form the proverb acquires in transmission and translation constitutes a new “offer of information” about the source text’s “offer of information” (Vermeer & Reiß 2013, 69-71). This entails a reconceptualisation from the translator, involving dynamic process of conceptual blending (Boase-Bier 2001).<sup>13</sup> Translation is dynamic and “online”, involving a negotiation between inputs – the translator’s interpretation of the source text on the one hand; the grammar and lexis of the target language (along with the *skopos* of translation) on the other. The translator has imaginative freedom in how to blend these inputs. She is not constrained by either, but must incorporate both. The target language depends on a wealth of encyclopaedic knowledge from the target world, which the translator cannot help but bring into the blend. She concomitantly removes the text from the encyclopaedic world of the source language. Her translation is a reconceptualisation and transformation, in terms relevant for the target context.

As an imaginative blending process, translation is of a kind with the other manifestations of the “proverb process” discussed above (interpretation and application). It too can participate in the dynamics of openness, closure, and transformation inherent in the nature of the proverb.

I commented above on the juxtaposition of nominals in Prov 18.4: four images set side by side without clarifying particles or verbs. This concision is an important generator of openness, as the relationship between the parts is not predetermined. To convey the openness, we could replicate the syntax of the Hebrew (as in my provisional translation above). Murphy advocates this general approach, and demonstrates it admirably in his commentary

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<sup>13</sup> See also e.g. Lewandowski-Tomaszczyk 2010, Mandelblit 1997, McElhanon 2006, Rydning 2005.

(Murphy 1998b). He laments translations in which “the rhythm and deliberate density of the Hebrew are flattened out for the sake of clarity” (Murphy 1998a, 621), and wherever possible he follows the ambiguous Hebrew syntax.<sup>14</sup>

The problem is that this type of translation is less natural in English than in Hebrew. Hebrew lacks a common present tense copula, and predicative sentences are frequently expressed through nominal juxtaposition, without great rhetorical effect.<sup>15</sup> By contrast, the copula is pervasive in English; it is ungrammatical to lack one. So, blended with the common structures of the target language, we would say “the words of a man’s mouth *are* deep waters; the fountain of wisdom *is* a flowing stream”.<sup>16</sup>

And to make clear the relationship between the cola, the translator may supply a conjunction: “and” if all the images are construed as positive and the cola as synonymous (so KJV, NET); “but” if the “deep waters” are negative, and the cola are antithetical (NIV). Alternatively, all three water images may depict one target domain – the words of a man’s mouth. Again, the target language prefers to make this explicit, e.g. through punctuation: “the words of a man’s mouth are: deep waters, a flowing stream, a fountain of wisdom” (cf. CSB, JPS). In these ways, the English might clarify the ambiguity of the Hebrew. Replicating the syntax leaves the proverb more open, but also more stilted and clunky, and thus less potent.

As well as syntax, each image blends with inputs from the target language:

מים עמוקים. This is almost always translated as “deep waters” in English versions. But removed from the conceptual frames and encyclopaedic knowledge of the Israelite world, many of the connotations and ambiguities of the Hebrew (discussed in §2) are lost. The translation blends the basic denotation of the Hebrew with new information, extracted from the world of the target language. For example, I might recall the several English idioms and proverbs which use “deep water” imagery. The words of a man’s mouth might get me “in too deep” – persuading me to a dangerous course of action from which there is no going back. They may put me “in deep water”, that is, in trouble. If I don’t understand them, I may feel

<sup>14</sup> He translates this verse, for example, as “deep waters, words from one’s mouth; a flowing stream, a fountain of wisdom”.

<sup>15</sup> Though I grant that this structuring is used distinctively often in Proverbs

<sup>16</sup> I have here reversed the word order: the Hebrew is predicate-subject; my translation is subject-predicate. In biblical Hebrew, a predicate-subject word order occurs in about 1/3 of cases, and is thus not uncommon (Joüon and Muraoka 2003, §154f). The reasons for fronting the predicate in Hebrew are disputed, but are not identical to the reasons in English. Fronting the predicate in translation would therefore not convey the precise nuances of the Hebrew and may prove an unhelpful confusion. I prefer a subject-predicate translation, which feels more natural, and may thus make the proverb more potent.

“out of my depth”. And remembering that “still waters run deep”, I may notice powerful currents under the surface of the speech, concealed by its placid exterior. Such imaginative extensions of the imagery, evoked through the English idiom, are only minimally evident in Hebrew. The translation has closed down the original avenues of interpretation, but it has opened up new ones.

נחל נבע. A נחל is a wadi, but translating like this lacks conceptual relevance to someone living outside a desert climate – many British English speakers may not even know the word. Translating by a more common English alternative like “stream” or “river” might increase the image’s relevance, but to the detriment of its power. As an image, the wadi has a particular double potency (see §1) – on the one hand bringing life to arid climes, on the other quickly overflowing and becoming destructive. The translation closes down and pacifies the ambiguity. Similarly with נבע – “flowing, pouring forth, springing up” – in translation, we lose the negative connotations of this root when associated with speech. Once again, translation closes down the meaning.

But this closure of some meanings may open up others. The proverb thus becomes applicable to new and different circumstances. For example, some translations have “bubbling brook” (ESV, NASB). This prioritises the image’s positive associations, the term “bubbling” bringing additional connotations of friendliness and happiness. Others have “gushing stream” (RSV). When connected with speech, “gushing” may suggest effusiveness, flattery and feigned enthusiasm. In each case, the proverb can be applied to new situations. What’s more, these translations are poetic. “Bubbling brook” is alliterative and onomatopoeic, capturing something of the repeated נ and ב sounds in the Hebrew, and “gushing” introduces a clever wordplay. The rhetorical power, usefulness, and transformational potential of the proverb are thus heightened.

מקור חכמה. A מקור is a fountain or spring – a vital source of water when rain is scarce. The phrase is almost always translated into English as a “fountain of wisdom”. Blended into the structures of daily experience of the British English speaker, the meaning is transformed. In Britain, the main function of fountains is not usually for drinking water. Rather, they are often beautiful installations, to be observed in public places. Wisdom, then, is beautifully crafted, publicly displayed, and captivating. The Message version’s “artesian springs” may capture something of the Hebrew (as it suggests naturally occurring underground waters), and it has a pleasing poetic ring, but it may lack cultural relevance for the average Brit.



However these images are translated, meanings will be closed down, opened up, and transformed. The translated proverb then becomes a source text for future cycles of reconceptualisation. The individual may pick it up, interpret it, apply it and transmit it in imaginative ways.

## Conclusion

I have suggested in this article that, when it comes to proverbs, we should not see translation as a discrete task, but part of an ongoing “proverb process”. This process involves cycles of reconceptualisation: interpretation, application, transmission, translation. Each cycle is imaginative and creative, based on the cognitive processes of conceptual blending. This inevitably leads to meanings being opened up, closed down, and transformed.

And this is part of the joy of the proverb. This genre in particular revels in the dynamics of openness, closure, and transformation. The translator who transforms the Hebrew text might be accused of not being faithful to the linguistic nuances of the original. But perhaps she is being *more* faithful to the genre, nature, and function of the source. She has not ignored the source culture, but has negotiated it in ways relevant for the target culture. §2 suggested that proverbs are distinctively open to interpretation. §3 argued that this openness intends to be closed down by contextually appropriate information. In §4, I suggested that, as an imaginative blend, a good translation does precisely this. Depending on the *skopos* of the translation, new meanings are imported from the world of the target language, and are thus relevant to this world. The blending process might result in new openness – new and different opportunities for contextual application. And it might make the proverb particularly powerful within those situations, by adding rhetorical flourishes or poetic devices.

Proverbs, in interpretation, application, and translation, are deep waters. As they flow ever onwards, streams of meaning open out and close down. And, if their course is transformed in new terrains, they can remain, like a fountain of wisdom, ever powerful, ever fresh.

## Appendix: Other examples of the “proverb process”

The “proverb process” (interpretation, application, translation) could be mapped for any saying in Proverbs, always entailing openness, closure, and transformation (though the nature and degree of these will vary). I briefly provide three further examples here of the “proverb process” at work.

נָזָם זָהָב בְּאַף חֲזִיר אִשָּׁה יָפָה וְסִרְתָּ טַעַם: (Prov 11.22)

“Like a gold ring in a pig’s snout is a beautiful woman without discretion” (ESV)

#### *Interpretation:*

The first colon creates an evocative, comical image of gross incongruity: a precious ring in the snout of a boar. This would evoke a range of cultural connotations within the source world. The gold ring (נָזָם זָהָב) adorned both men and women in ancient Israel, worn in the nose and ears (e.g. Gen 24.47, 35.4; Ex 32.2-3), likely as a sign of wealth and prestige. In Proverbs, wealth is ambiguous, properly bedecking those who embody wisdom (Prov 1.9, 4.9, 8.18), but having no rightful place with the wicked (Prov 11.4, 28; 13.11, 22; 22.16; 28.6, 8). Here, the gold ring is as misplaced as it is on the wanton daughters of Zion (Isa 3.21), or the adulteress (Ezek 16.12; Hos 2.15[13]) – even more misplaced, for the pig is known for its ceremonial uncleanness (Lev 11.7; Dt 14.8; cf. Isa 65.4, 66.3, 17).

The main source of openness is how this image fits with the second line. (1) Usually, the pig is taken as a depiction of the woman. The match is not exact: if we match the sides as “creature + adornment”, we get “pig/woman + ring/indiscretion”; but if we match them as “ugly + beautiful”, we get “pig/indiscretion + ring/woman”. An evocative general comparison emerges without exactitude, which leads to imaginative blending processes. The woman’s beauty blends with a ring – a status symbol but a poor disguise for true character. Indeed, the ring is far outweighed by the pig, as beauty is by tastelessness. And as such, the woman herself blends with a pig – an abomination in religion and society.

(2) Alternatively, instead of mapping the lines part-for-part, the whole of the second line might be equivalent to the נָזָם זָהָב: a beautiful, indiscrete woman is like a ring on a pig. And what is the pig? What else but her husband (Heim 2008, Fox 2009)? In this reading, he, not she, becomes an abomination. Elsewhere too, Proverbs advises a young man about marriage

(e.g. Prov 5.18-20, 18.22, 19.13-14, 31.10-31) Carrying the imaginative scenario further, Heim suggests the ring as an instrument to lead and control the pig, as the wife may do the husband (Heim 2008, 26).

*Application:*

In application, these imaginative possibilities for the proverb are necessarily closed down – most obviously by the identity of the addressee, as the base meanings of the proverb blend with the circumstances of real life.

(1) *A young woman is generally admired in my community because of her good looks and captivating manner. But she has given bad advice, dubious in both intellect and ethics. I see through her beguilement and whisper to a friend* נזם זהב באף חזיר אשה יפה וסרת טעם

(2) *A young man is attracted to this woman, and seeks to make her his wife. I warn him against it, suggesting that her indiscretion might rub off on him, and the marriage would reveal his own boorish character. She might look good, but she'll lead him by the nose.* נזם זהב באף חזיר אשה יפה וסרת טעם

In these two applications, I close down the openness in different ways. In the former, I blend the pig with the young woman, and in the latter with her suitor. Their own personalities would direct the prescient features of this characterisation. In the former, the main incongruity is between beauty and indiscretion as character traits; in the latter, it is between a good-looking wife and a boorish husband. Both applications have sexist undertones, but the former focusses on the individual woman, and the latter assumes patriarchal structures of society, where women are ornaments for men.

*Translation:*

When translated, blended with the thought and linguistic structures of the target world, many of the connotations of the Hebrew retreat, and new connotations emerge: the meaning is inevitably transformed. In the popular imagination of British society, rings are more often worn by women than men, they are not particularly status symbols, and nose rings belong to young rebellious subcultures. Pigs do not suggest ceremonial uncleanness, but crudeness and dirtiness, and – when applied to a woman – that she is overindulgent and overweight.

*A piggy complete with a pearl; a pretty but indiscrete girl.*

This translation assumes interpretation (1) above. Soundplay, subtly present in the repeated  $\tau$  sounds in Hebrew, is heightened here for rhetorical effect. The tone is more flippant and juvenile than in the original, heightening its dismissive and patronising nature: the חזיר, with its worrying connotations of impurity, is replaced with a “piggy”; and the “beautiful woman” is now a “pretty girl”. The “gold ring” becomes a “pearl”, which has the requisite connotations of value, and more striking euphony in English.

*Like a gold ring hooking a swine is a trophy wife with looks but no mind.*

This assumes interpretation (2): the woman is the ring in her husband’s nose. The English “swine” is used derogatively for unpleasant men, itself blending man and beast. The woman is explicitly a “wife” (a common translation of אִשָּׁה elsewhere), and what’s more a “trophy wife”. This idea is taken from the modern western cultural milieu, but plays on the source text’s own connotations of value and honour. One particular aspect of טַעַם (“discretion”) is centralised: intellectual capacity (Ps 119.66; Prov 26.16). As faithful iterations of the proverb process, these translations necessarily close the openness and transform the meaning. By so doing, they enhance the proverb’s cultural relevance and potency.

יֵשׁ מְתַעֲשֵׂר וְאֵין כֹּל מְתַרוֹשֵׁשׁ וְהוֹן רָב: (Prov 13.7)

“One pretends to be rich, yet has nothing; another pretends to be poor, yet has great wealth” (ESV)

The main openness in the *interpretation* of this proverb comes from the hithpael/hithpolel of the verbs. They could be reflexive-factitive (Williams 2007, P. 154), indicating an actual state of affairs (“makes himself rich / poor”). If so, the proverb may challenge hearers to look to God for wealth, rather than to their own strength. Or, they could be reflexive-estimative (Williams 2007, P.155): “thinks himself rich / poor” or “pretends to be rich / poor”. In this case, the proverb problematises deception.

This openness is necessarily closed and transformed in *application*. For the proverb to find traction, the referent's relationship to wealth must be clear to the hearer. As the saying is blended with the real-life scenario, its ambiguity is clarified and vagueness specified. Equally, *translation* will transform the proverb, and open up new connotations and avenues of interpretation. I might contrast "self-made wealth" with "purposed poverty", and thus tap into and challenge the modern societal idealisation of the "self-made man". Or I could contrast two sorts of "poser" or "faker" – which may be particularly relevant for the "flash-your-cash" culture of doctored Instagram.

פָּגוּשׁ דָּב שֶׁכּוּל בְּאִישׁ וְאֶל-כָּסִיל בְּאִלְתּוֹ: (Prov 17.12)

"Let a man meet a she-bear robbed of her cubs rather than a fool in his folly" (ESV)

*Interpretation:* The infinitive absolute פָּגוּשׁ seems to be functioning as a jussive, with דָּב as its subject "let a bear meet". I take בְּאִישׁ to indicate the oblique object of the verb: "let her meet *a man*".<sup>17</sup> The bear is a trope for unrestrained ferocity in the HB, her anger particularly heightened when (as here) she is bereft of cubs (2 Sam 17.8; Hos 13.8). This image has imaginative potential for how the story will unfold.

The second colon introduces an ambiguity. Most interpreters take the "fool in his folly" as equivalent to the "bear bereaved" – one who will harm you if you step too close. And this is indeed a productive metaphor, as the images blend, and wider encyclopaedic knowledge is incorporated (e.g. the dangers of friendship with fools: Prov 13.20, 14.7, 28.7). However, it is also possible that כָּסִיל is equivalent to שֶׁכּוּל, and אִישׁ בְּ, functioning equivalently in both cola (to indicate the oblique object of the verb): "and do not let a fool [meet] his folly". This invokes the wider personification of virtues and vices in Proverbs (e.g. 2.11; 13.6, 21; 20.28), who bring good or harm to those who accept them.

*Application* will close the proverb, depending on whether the referent is a victim to the senseless deeds of the fool, or himself a fool, harmed by his own idiocy. Furthermore, the implications of the bear image are specified as it blends with the circumstances. Perhaps the

<sup>17</sup> Though elsewhere, פָּגַשׁ takes a direct, rather than oblique, object.

violence inflicted is physical, or perhaps metaphoric for an ensuing calamity. Perhaps the salient feature is its thoughtlessness, lack of restraint, or painful effects.

Most translations close the openness by clarifying the syntax, but it would be possible (if not too stilted) to retain it, e.g. “Let a bereaved bear meet with a man, and not a fool with his folly”. The “fool with his folly” could be equivalent to the “bear” or to the meeting of the “bear with a man”. This translation is also sensitive to the alliteration in the Hebrew (שכול / בא / בסיל בא), and offers its own (b-b, m-m, f-f). The connotations surrounding the bear are necessarily transformed, removed from the ancient Near Eastern context. But are no less powerful, blended with the fears and expectations of the modern world.

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## **Abbreviations**

CSB	Christian Standard Bible (2017)
ESV	English Standard Version (2001)
JPS	Jewish Publication Society version (1917)
KJV	King James Version (Authorized Version) (1611)
NASB	New American Standard Bible (1995)
NET	NET Bible (New English Translation, 2005)
NIV	New International Version (1978)
RSV	Revised Standard Version (1952)